

## Living with Catastrophe: The Mixed Messages of Jewish Texts

by Leonard Gordon

In the Jewish historical imagination, the year 1492 marks a tragedy, the close of an era, not the start of a new one. March 31st of that year, a date that stands between the surrender of the Moors and Columbus' journey to the Americas, was the date on which the Spanish monarchs decreed the expulsion of the Jews. As America honors the 500th anniversary of Columbus' voyage, we are aware of the voices of those whose lives were destroyed by the same impulses that sustained Columbus' efforts. This essay takes the year 1492 as a starting point and asks about how Judaism has responded to the catastrophes, destructions and exiles that punctuate and often delineate the outlines of Jewish history. This inquiry is potentially relevant on three levels: first, as an example of the problem faced by all historians, including historians of religion, of fixing the meaning of classical texts. How do we determine which texts do, in fact, represent Judaic responses to catastrophe? Second, what can we learn as students of religion and as religious practitioners about how this particular tradition has dealt, and continues to deal, with catastrophe? Finally, what specific lessons does the history of Judaism hold for the contemporary American Jewish community, a community living in relative affluence and security, one generation after the destruction of Judaism's European center?

Dividing history into distinct and meaningful periods and identifying turning points in that history are exercises fraught with danger. Though we all recognize the need to mark transitions and to organize knowledge into digestible units, the lesson of the 500th anniversary of Columbus' voyage seems to be clear: one tradition's grand adventure may coincide with the tragedy of another, what from one point of view may be a significant turning point, may represent from another perspective an insignificant event on a longer continuum.

For historians of Judaism two kinds of events are most frequently chosen to demarcate the major breaks in Jewish life and thought: either the dates of exiles and catastrophe or the publication of works written in response to those events. To illustrate what may be called the "crisis and response hermeneutic," let me take you on a brief tour of the history of Judaism through the writings of some of the greatest historians of the past 100 years. After this review we will stand back to ask what it all means.

For the biblical historian Yehezkiel Kaufmann in his history of The Religion of Israel (1960) "The fall of Jerusalem (to the Babylonians in the year 586 b.c.e.) is

the great watershed of the history of Israelite religion" (447). In his preface to Wellhausen's Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel, Robertson writes (1957) "(Pentateuchal law) did not attain its present form till the Israelites were the captives or the subjects of a foreign power" (vii). Thus, according to these historians who disagreed on much, the great centerpiece of biblical religion, the Torah finds its present form and hence its ultimate meaning only after the Israelites had left their land and been forced into a situation of exile. At the roots of Israelite religion is the need to respond to exile, and the response is found not in what we would come to recognize as traditional theodicy - encounters with the problem of evil - not in the book of Job with its agonizing debates about divine justice and not in the writings of Jeremiah with his radical call for the people to recognize their sin. Rather the response to exile that became the basis of Israelite religion is found in legislation that seems to hold only in the Land of Israel and only at a time when priest and King are in power.

This insight is developed by the historian of religion Jacob Neusner in work that locates the origins of rabbinic Judaism in the aftermath of the destruction of the second temple by Rome in 70 of the common era. Neusner studies the Mishnah, a document to which we shall return in a moment, and he finds in the first text of rabbinic Judaism, redacted and promulgated around the year 220 of the common era, a response to destruction and chaos that reformulated Judaism in new and creative ways parallel to the reformulation accomplished by the priestly redactors of the Torah (the first five books of Scripture) some 650 years earlier. Moreover, Neusner (1979) draws an explicit connection between the situation of the early rabbis and our own time. He writes:

What second century Jews have to teach the generation of the last decades of the twentieth century is how to make use of imagination and fantasy to confront, defy, and overcome chaos and disorder. The Mishnah, the first and principle document of Rabbinic Judaism, is the work of the second century (1).

Just as Torah and the Mishnah have been understood as responses to disaster, so too medieval historiography has been constructed as a response to the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, the next major break in Jewish history. Yosef Yerushalmi (1982), one of

the major American Jewish historians of our time writes that:

. . . the primary stimulus to the rise of Jewish historiography in the sixteenth century was the great catastrophe that had put an abrupt end to open Jewish life in the Iberian Peninsula at the end of the fifteenth . . . (589)

Yerushalmi the historian finds in the response to the exile a bursting forth of historical writing, just as Gershom Scholem the scholar of mysticism finds in the aftermath of the exile a radical break in the history of the mystical tradition of Kabbalah. Scholem's Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism (1954) contains the following passage:

After the Exodus from Spain, Kabbalism underwent a complete transformation. A catastrophe of this dimension . . . could hardly take place without affecting every sphere of Jewish life and feeling. (244)

Finally, the following, taken from a course syllabus entitled "Judaism in Late Antiquity: Destruction and Creation" summarizes the point of view that has dominated this tradition of modern Jewish historiography:

After a nation is destroyed by war - its rulers killed, its institutions razed - how does the surviving populace recreate their lives? What do they think is important to rebuild? After World War II Europe focused on its economic infrastructure . . . After obliteration by war, the Israelites felt the loss of their religious institution -the Jerusalem Temple -much more than the destruction of their government, their trade or their standard of living. Each time the Temple was destroyed, the ensuing crisis produced a new reformulation of Judaism (emphasis added) . . . (Flesher, 1987:88)

The point of view of the crisis and response hermeneutic expressed throughout these works looks to moments in the Jewish past when crises have led to creativity, and these writers offer their results to the contemporary community of scholars and lay people as models for survival in the face of the continued insecurity and marginality of the Jews. Neusner's construction of the Mishnah as reflecting the early rabbis' desire to create a new religious system based on stasis and human intention, Yerushalmi's validation of the work of history, Scholem's location of the roots of modernity in the crises of late medieval mysticism, all represent a form of theodicy, a grappling with the problem of evil. Why do the innocent suffer, why do the wicked prosper, and

collectively, why have the chosen people who are aligned through an everlasting covenant with God, suffered so much in the course of their long history? These scholars aim to show how Judaism has in the past creatively responded to crisis, and they thereby demonstrate that Jewish marginality need not impair the development of a meaningful Jewish life. In what follows, I will be contrasting works that explicitly examine the problem of evil with other works such as the Mishnah that are not explicit theodicies, (that is, they contain no sustained account of the problem of evil) in an effort to demonstrate that even Jewish texts that do not claim for themselves the theological status of theodicy can be understood as responses to the problem of evil, responses to catastrophe.

Each of the historians mentioned above is, in his own way, making a case for how modern Jews should reconstruct Jewish religious life in the aftermath of the destruction of European Jewry (the holocaust, or shoah). Less obviously, they also share another important message. Each claims that the truest Judaic response to catastrophe can be found not in those texts that explicitly respond to disaster but rather in texts that traditionally had not been regarded as theodicies at all. I have contrasted the legal passages of the torah with the more explicit theodicies found in the books of Job or Jeremiah to show that the biblical response to exile finds varied, not always explicit, articulation. Something similar can be demonstrated with the artifacts of two other periods of Jewish history, the first century and our own.

In the year 70 of our era the Roman conquest of Jerusalem and destruction of the Second Temple and of the Second Commonwealth dramatically changed the social and political circumstances of Jewish life in the land of Israel and required accommodations that led to a major transition in the history of Judaism. Unlike those Temple states around the Roman empire that gradually faded from history, the Jewish polity survived because the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple and end of its cult facilitated a reformulation of Judaism away from a tradition of priests and Kings, sacrifices and pilgrimages, into one centered around rabbi and synagogue, study and worship. No longer would a hereditary priesthood and monarchy dominate Jewish political and religious life; personal piety could no longer be expressed through sacrifices at a central shrine. Rabbinic Judaism, with its distinctive leaders, and rituals of synagogue and house of study, rituals with roots in predestruction Jewish life but without clear sanction in biblical traditions, gradually came to maturity and later came to control the Jewish religious imagination.

When anthologists seek exemplary responses to the crisis presented by the loss of the Temple, the following passages or others like them are chosen. Each represents

an explicit coming to terms with catastrophe. One response rooted in biblical prophecy, named Apocalyptic, sees in the tragedies of history signs of the coming end to history. The Apocalypse of Ezra (4:10-26) offers the following guidance:

... if you are alive, you will see, and if you live long, you will often marvel, because the age is hastening swiftly to its end. For it will not be able to bring the things that have been promised to the righteous in their appointed time, because this age is full of sadness and infirmities . . . .

Early Christianity, often represented by the Epistle to the Hebrews (7:23-28) has a different understanding, seeing the person of Jesus Christ as the response to the loss of the cult:

The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office; but (Jesus) holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever . . . . He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, he did this once and for all when he offered up himself.

For the early Christian community, the Temple's destruction was an event predicted by the Gospel and easily understood in terms of divine punishment of the Jewish nation.

The first century historian Josephus counselled political quietism in the face of destruction, absolving the Roman general Titus of responsibility for the fire that set the Temple ablaze

(War 6):

Titus replied that even if the Jews did climb on (the Temple wall) for military purposes he would not make war on inanimate objects instead of men.

Josephus' call for acceptance of Roman rule echoed the pragmatic teachings of Jeremiah.

A final exemplary explicit responses to catastrophe is the following passage found in a third century code and commentary, the Tosefta (Sotah 15:11-15):

When the Temple was destroyed, large numbers in Israel became ascetics, binding themselves neither to eat meat nor to drink wine. Rabbi Joshua got into conversation with them and said to them, "My sons, why do you not eat meat?" They replied, "Shall we eat meat which used to be brought as an offering on the altar, now that this altar

is in abeyance?" He said, "Why do you not drink wine?" They replied, "Shall we drink wine which used to be poured as a libation on the altar, but now is no longer?" He said, "Let us also not eat figs and grapes, for from them the first fruits were brought on the feast of Atzeret. Let us also not eat bread for they used to bring the two loaves and the bread of the presence. Let us not drink water, for they used to pour of it libations on the Festival (of Sukkot)." They (the ascetics) were silent. He (R. Joshua) said to them, "Not to mourn at all is impossible for the decree is ordained. Also to mourn overmuch is impossible."

This story, simple in form and easily grasped, cautions against apocalyptic interpretations of history as it suggests the limits to the practice of mourning. Looking to later rabbinic responses to the events of 70 and the later defeat of the messianic Bar Kochba war against Rome in 135 c.e., anthologists (such as Roskies [1989] and Mintz [1984]) turn as well to the rabbinic midrash or commentary to the book of Lamentations which contains numerous stories about the wars themselves and the rationales for divine punishment of Israel.

None of all of these explicit Jewish responses to catastrophe speaks with clarity to the situation of contemporary Jews in America. Living in relative affluence, connected to the holocaust through emotional and sometimes through family ties, but rarely through direct experience, separated by a generation from the events themselves, American Jewry finds little guidance in the explicit theodicies of the prophetic and midrashic traditions with their emphases on divine justice and the meaning of history. American Jews find it hard to accept the idea that we are living in the end time, that the events of 1933-45 were punishment for sin, that the Nazis were agents of divine punishment, or that the creation of the state of Israel represents the promised redemption. Our leading post Holocaust theologians, such as the writer Elie Weisel or the historian of religion Richard Rubenstein have struggled on the deepest levels of explicit reflection to find meaning in these events and have led to no reformulation of Judaism for our time. (See, for example, Roskies [1984] who deals exclusively with literary responses to the Holocaust.) In both cases, their main audience has been outside of the Jewish community. The reformulations of Judaism that have in fact spoken most forcefully to American modernity are feminist texts. In the work of modern feminists I see a contemporary example of the crisis and response hermeneutic, comparable to the search for the implicit,

rather than explicit, responses to disaster found in the first centuries of our era.

To illustrate this kind of implicit response I suggest we look not to the commentaries on biblical prophecy but to a work already referred to called the Mishnah, a text edited and promulgated within the Jewish communities of Palestine and then Babylonia at the start of the third century of our era under the sponsorship of the Patriarch Rabbi Judah, a leader who stood in alliance with a group of sages and disciples whom we have come to know collectively as the *tannaim*, or early rabbis. This work defies description in terms of the genres of literature we recognize in late antiquity. Neither law code, nor history book, neither philosophy nor school text, the Mishnah contains elements of each, all couched in the language of archaic laws 5/6th of which did not apply to the century in which the text was produced. That is to say, the Mishnah speaks of a world of Temple cult and King that had long since passed away and that the rabbis, as men of political practice, seem not to have desired to restore.

The rabbis of the late second and early third centuries were concerned with the transmission of tradition. They take scripture as their implicit starting point and build from there. The Mishnah organizes itself around six topics, all connected in direct ways to earlier Scriptural law. They are: (1) Blessings and Sacred Agriculture (detailing the agricultural offerings made to priest, levite and poor, as well as the blessings to be recited on the occasions of life), (2) Sabbaths and Festivals (focusing largely on the order of services in the Temple on special days and ignoring with few exceptions the life of the synagogue), (3) On the transfer of Women (a section frequently translated simply as "On Women" but dealing almost entirely with those moments during which women are transferred from father to husband and husband to father or second husband), (4) Civil Damages and Court procedures (describing in detail the world of the Sanhedrin and minor courts and the modes of civil litigation), (5) Temple cult (examining the life of the Jerusalem Temple on ordinary days), and (6) Purity rules (as they apply in Jerusalem's holy precincts and in the daily life of the Israelite). The Mishnah does not claim to be a new scripture and is unintelligible without keeping biblical legislation in mind. Some have gone so far as to argue that the Mishnah is an abridged commentary to Scripture with the proof texts and explicit connections removed in the name of producing a shorter text (Halivni, 1986).

The concern for connection to the past dominates the explicit discourse of the text without controlling the meaning contained within the various laws under the Mishnah's review. Thus, while talking about rules of purity that once found their meaning only within the Temple cult, the rabbis subtly reformulate the laws to

convey meaning in a world without the Temple and its priesthood. The Mishnah's laws reenforce the message that human intention defines Judaism's diverse systems of sanctification, of *kedushah* and this message transcends, at all points, the particular cases under review.

The Mishnah assumes, rather than explicitly states, its theological principles. The unity and existence of God, the significance of Jewish peoplehood and the land of Israel, the nature of the covenant and the rationales for Jewish suffering in the face of the special relationship between Israel and God are never central subjects for discussion. Whether because these topics were broadly accepted or much debated, they are virtually ignored in this first classic formulation of rabbinic thought.

Perhaps the most famous passage in the Mishnah dealing with theology is that found in M. Hagigah 2:1:

The laws of incest may not be expounded before three persons, nor the story of the creation before two, nor the chariot before one alone, unless he is a Sage who understands of his own knowledge. Whosoever gives his mind to four things it were better for him if he had not come into the world - what is above? what is beneath? what was before time? and what will be hereafter?

Here we are told explicitly that the great questions of religious life are not the subjects of communal learning and that some, in fact, are not fit matters for even individual reflection. What are the topics forbidden or severely limited: sexuality (the levitical laws of prohibited relations), how God created the world (a topic we know from other works was explicitly discussed by Jews in late antiquity in order to learn how humans could use divine formulae to create things themselves), and finally the nature of the divine presence as described in the Chariot scene of the prophet Ezekiel (a passage subjected to detailed analysis in numerous surviving works of esoteric and exoteric Jewish mysticism. Finally, we are told that even the classic issues of human origins and ends, of what is before and what after, are not matters for human religious concern. If these matters are not fit for religious reflection what are we left to reflect upon? A midrash on Jeremiah 16:11 provides an answer:

Jeremiah states:

. . . then you shall say to them, "Because your fathers have forsaken me, says the LORD, and have gone after other gods and have served and worshiped them, and have forsaken me and have not kept my law . . ."

The midrash rephrases the divine response:

Rabbi Hiyyah bar Ba said, (God said)  
 "I will ignore (the fact that) 'you have  
 forsaken me' as long as you keep my  
 law." (P. Hag. 1:7 [76c])

Reflection on and observance of the law replaces theology for the early rabbis.

Finally, the rabbis do not make an explicit claim for their own authority. That too is assumed. No tractate of the Mishnah explains how one becomes a rabbinic master or the duties of a rabbinic disciple. Discussions of master-disciple relations are few and scattered, as are narratives concerning the relations between rabbis and non-rabbinic Jews. The rabbinic claim to authority is ultimately based on the acceptance by other Jews of their texts and their learning, not on prophetic revelation, miracles or hereditary authority (though all three are sometimes invoked, see, for example, M. Avot 1:1). The process by which rabbinic learning became the centerpiece of a new Judaic system was a slow one that is difficult to trace, but all indications are that between the second and sixth centuries the rabbinic vision of a world without a Temple took hold throughout the world of Palestinian and Babylonian Jewry and gradually came to dominate even more broadly.

In these four points, and they are (1) attachment to traditional forms, (2) a willingness to reformulate the past, (3) avoidance of explicit theological reflection and (4) the redistribution of authority, I find the essence of the early rabbinic response to catastrophe and exile. In the rulings of the Mishnah, written in the north of the land of Israel, removed from the sites of destruction in Jerusalem, in a world of relative affluence, one hundred and fifty years after the Temple's destruction and two generations after the defeat of Bar Kochba, in a world that was politically secure, in short, in a world analogous to our own, to that of contemporary Jewry, the Mishnah points to a middle path between denial and explicit theologizing about destruction. The Mishnah normalizes the experience of the people by changing everything while showing respect for everything, by centering the texts of the past while reformulating their meaning and that of the social system that would support them in the future. In this way, the Mishnah, perhaps like the writers of the priestly source in Scripture and later medieval kabbalists, point out implicitly how they want the Jewish people to respond to the crises that punctuate Jewish history.

Whenever one speculates about the implicit meanings of ancient texts one stands on shaky ground. The danger of anachronism is great and the possibilities of misreadings are ever present. But if Harold Bloom is correct in asserting that the history of interpretation knows only strong and weak misreadings rather than true and false interpretations, then I can only hope that you

find this particular reading of the Mishnah a strong one, one that explains some of the text's mysteries while preserving some of its distinctiveness. The next move I will propose, however, puts us on even shakier ground. I move to our own era and the quest for appropriate analogies in the post holocaust world of contemporary American Judaism. I ask: Where is the Mishnah's program being carried out today?

Just as the anthologies of Judaic responses to earlier destructions focus on the explicit while scholarship focuses on the implicit, so too our anthologies of literary and theological responses to the Holocaust have taken as their starting points works that center the events of the Holocaust and the problem of evil. I would propose that a major source for American post holocaust reflections is to be found in the work of Jewish feminist scholarship, and one of its best exemplars to date is Standing Again at Sinai by the historian of Judaism and Jewish theologian Judith Plaskow.

The topical program of the Mishnah assumes earlier, biblical legislation, and Plaskow's program follows the three headings of earlier classical Jewish theologies in naming her core chapters with the titles: Torah, Israel and God. Most striking to my reading are six assumptions that are found in the preface to her work. These assumptions, not explicitly intended as a statement of dogma, function for Plaskow much like Maimonides' Thirteen Principle of Faith or Mordechai Kaplan's Thirteen aspirations for a reconstructed Jewish life. Plaskow (1990) writes:

First of all, in the face of sometimes contrary evidence, I assume that Jewish women past and present are part of the Jewish people . . .

Second, I assume that, for better and for worse, Jewish history is my history, the texts that record that history are my texts. Abraham and Sarah are my ancestors, as are Elijah and the women who worshiped the Queen of Heaven. I went forth from Egypt and danced with Miriam at the shores of the sea.

Third, aside from general discussion of the language of liturgy, I say little in (this) book about the Sabbath, the holidays, the cycles of the year, or the cycles of individual life . . . because I take for granted their continuation .

Fourth, and on a more strictly theological level, I assume there is a God and that God is one.

Fifth, I assume that to have been a slave in the land of Egypt is the basis of a profound religious obligation to do justice in the world. I assume that one finds God in the world, in acts of love and justice, and not beyond or outside the world.

. . . I am also aware of the particularity of my perspective. (xvixix)

Let us examine how each of these points mirrors the Mishnaic perspective. Like the Mishnah, Plaskow assumes that a reformulation of Judaism begins with a redefinition of who defines Jewish religious experience. For the rabbis of the Mishnah that was the community of rabbis and disciples, a lay community standing apart from the hereditary priesthood. For Plaskow, the starting point is the enfranchisement of Jewish women and the recovery of their history.

Having made that break, Plaskow reaffirms her connectedness to the tradition by assuming the significance of precisely those texts the absolute status of which she has now thrown into question. For the Jewish feminist who wishes to remain within Judaism the texts of Jewish history are seen as "my texts" and not something foreign and imposed even as they are named as men's texts rather than texts that fully express the totality of the divine will for humanity. In her third assumption, Jewish law and observance are left unquestioned. These customs take on new meaning and new forms in a feminist revisioning of tradition: women's prayer services and prayer books, New Moon festivals and new celebrations reflecting that which is distinctive in the life cycle of women. Each of these is from some perspectives radical innovations on par with the early rabbinic decision to modify Temple rituals for the life of the synagogue and house of study, but they are presented here as matters of little consequence, innovations that need not be so named.

This pattern is followed as well in Plaskow's explicitly theological assumptions. The unity of God is proclaimed even as new names for the divine are proposed, and a theory of divine immanence tied to an ethic of social justice follows.

Finally, just as the early rabbis developed a theory of their own authority, a theory based on a new understanding of the primacy of the master disciple relationship over that of parent and child, Plaskow offers us a highly individualistic view of authority, grounding her own discourse in the particularity of her perspective as an American, ashkenazic women of a certain place, time, and class. In our post-modern, post holocaust world, the world of Peter Berger's "heretical imperative," (1980) where each of us, even the most traditional, recognizes that religious life is a choice we face every day, Plaskow places the individual mind in its social setting as the primary unit for the analysis of contemporary Judaism.

The holocaust makes no appearance in *Standing Again at Sinai*, yet the impulse behind Plaskow's revisioning of the tradition to which she feels deeply tied can best be understood as a reflection on the Jewish historical experience. Beginning with the marginalization and suffering of Jewish women, their experience becomes a model for understanding the suffering of Jews in the

broader worlds in which Jews live. If not for the continuing marginality and suffering of the Jewish people, if not for the continued problem of Jewish identity within the feminist movement and within American and world society more generally, why should Plaskow work so hard to revise and struggle with a tradition that is, in so many ways, problematic and unrecoverable from her perspective? Plaskow's main confrontation with the problem of evil comes in her discussion of the need to reimagine God as "a complex and changing reality. God as source can also be experienced as abyss; God as friend can also appear as enemy" (168).

I make no claims here about the Jewish authenticity of Plaskow's theology. Such judgements are ultimately made not by historians of religion but by religious communities over time. I am struck however as a close reader of the Mishnah and of the various Judaic responses to the destructions of both 70 and of World War II, that the explicit responses, even those that are frequently anthologized, often are not the most historically significant. In keeping with the scholars of the crisis and response hermeneutic I look to the past as a model for the present and ongoing situation of the Jews. In recent years, since the early 1970's, there has been an outpouring of testimony, theology and history regarding the dark events named the holocaust, as we sort through them and prepare our own ongoing responses to the problem of evil. I would caution that we read broadly and carefully, looking to the model provided by the Mishnah, for those responses that recognize the newness of our situation, those responses that change everything while denying that anything has changed.

I conclude by returning to the questions with which I began. In identifying Judaic responses to catastrophe I call on us to examine both the explicit and implicit traditions, what one might call the exoteric and esoteric theodicies of Judaism. On one, public, level, Judaic texts restate a faith in divine providence and the divine assurance of ultimate justice. On another, more hidden level, other texts imply the need for substantive change. For the rabbis of the Mishnah, synagogue and house of study can replace the Temple cult. For Judith Plaskow, dualistic language in the liturgy and new rituals are proposed to replace older, accepted forms. As students of religion, we see reenforced here the truism that change in religious communities takes place within the limiting constraints of tradition, preserving the aura of the sacred around innovation. Finally, the specific examples I have chosen are designed to speak directly to contemporary American Judaism. In the tradition of the historians I discussed earlier, I too believe that history has lessons to teach and that the history of the first century speaks in a particular way to our own time.

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